

Colonel of General Staff Jan Karcz

Charge at Worotniów, 15 July 1920

This was when we were fighting on the River Styr against Budienny's cavalry.

At that time our cavalry regiments were reorganising feverishly in the Zamość area, replenishing their numbers for the heavy fighting against the mass of Red cavalry that awaited them. While waiting for this to happen, after heavy fighting in the vicinity of Równe [Rivne], the 1st Cavalry Brigade was on the River Styr tasked with holding back Budienny's advance, alongside the 6th Legion Infantry Division. The brigade was made up of the 1st Light Horse Regiment,¹ 7th Lancer Regiment and 1st *Divizion* of Horse Artillery.

The regiments of the brigade were in poor condition, but the mood was good. It had been commanded for two days by Captain Jan Głogowski, while I took command of the 1st Light Horse Regiment after the merger of the two *divizioni* near Łuck [Lutsk].

On 15 July, around 08:30, I received an order to move the regiment through Hnidawa² and Boratyń into the area of the temporary bridge over the river Styr at the southern exit of Mały Boratyń village. Our two days of rest was over. We were to wait for an advance by the 1st Cavalry Brigade and 6th Infantry Division, in order to break up the Bolsheviks grouped in the area of Młynów [Mlyniv].

I alerted the regiment, and around 10:00 we set off from Omelanika [Velykyi Omelyanyk] towards Boratyń. The 7th Lancer Regiment had moved in front of us and garrisoned the hills lying directly to the west of Łyszczce [Lyshe]. The sounds of machine gun fire coming from there indicated that as soon as we crossed the river a battle awaited us. As usual we knew little about the situation. The infantry was to come along the road from Łuck, and our regiment, having reached Boratyń, was halted.

The hours dragged by, and still the order to cross the bridge did not come. Instead the brigade began to pull out individual squadrons. The 4th Squadron crossed and occupied the hills just north-east of Krupa village, thus directly covering the crossing. Whereas the 3rd Squadron was directed to the sector of the 7th Lancer Regiment and subordinated to it.

Finally the order came to cross the river in the late afternoon. The regiment, without the 3rd and 4th Squadrons and an HMG platoon, but reinforced with a horse battery, was to be the eastern flank guard of the infantry division marching along the Dubno road. The 4th Squadron was to rejoin us later; the rest of the brigade was to set out only after the entire infantry column had passed.

The regiment crossed the bridge and then over the road when the tail of the infantry advance guard column had passed by. In my advance guard I had the 1st Squadron with Lieutenant Dudzinski, and then the Technical, 2nd and HMG Squadrons marched behind. The axis of our march ran from the intersection of the road near the village of Krupa (1 km to the east) along the dirt road to Zaława [Zalav'ya], Piane [Piannie], and Moskiewszczyzna [Moskovshchyna].

However, before the 1st Squadron had even moved a kilometre down that route, it sent a verbal report that it had seen a large column of Soviet cavalry marching from the eastern edge of the village of Worotniów [Vorotniv] towards Wierzhówka [Verkhivka]. As I was with my unit near the road while the front of the regiment's main column was pulling out, I rode up to the front, where I could see the long column in a cloud of dust.

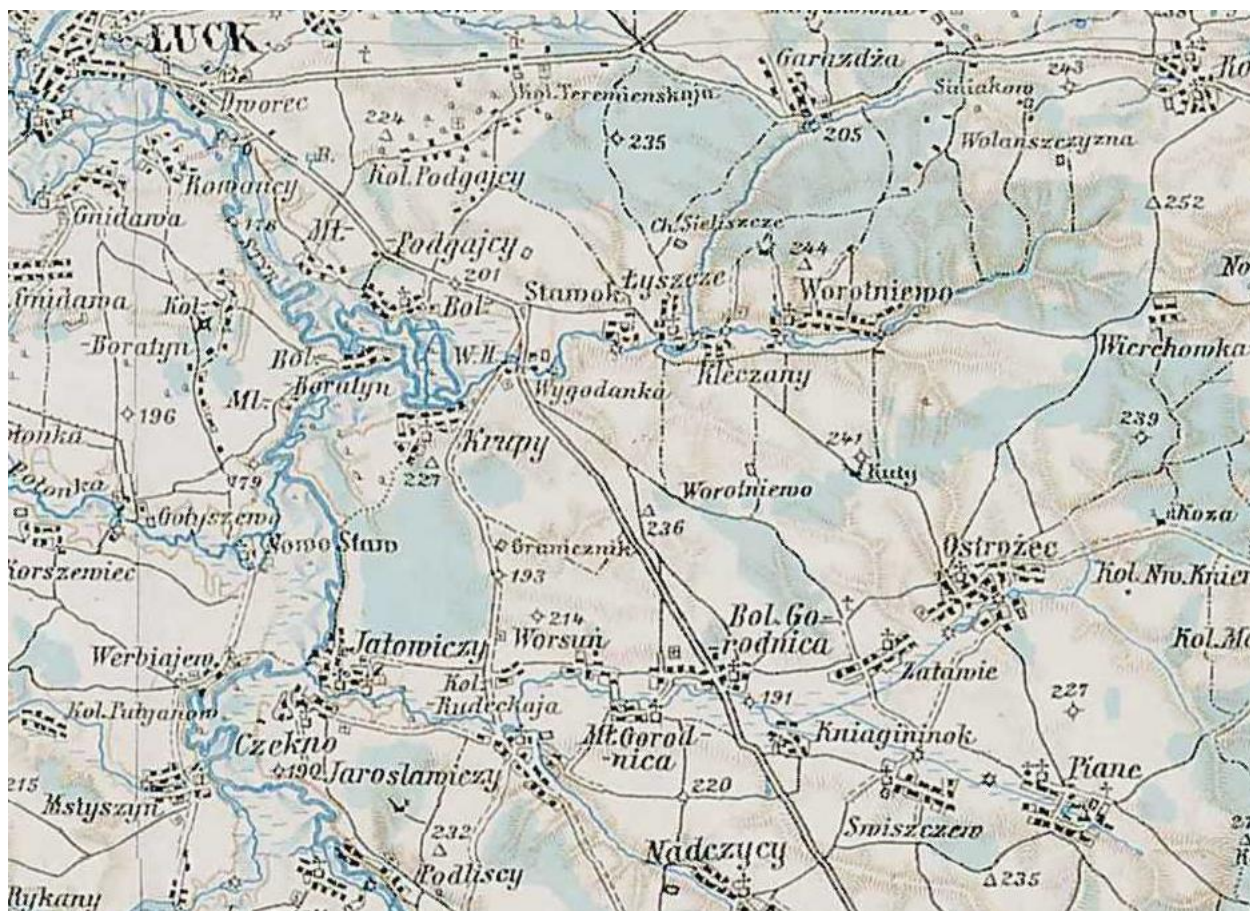
Initially I was going to report to the 7th Lancer Regiment that the defenders were withdrawing from in front of its sector, when suddenly the column changed its direction of its march and deployed in a line facing us. Then the orders came instinctively: I pointed at the enemy line and ordered Lieutenant Dudzinski to strike it on horseback; the rest of the regiment would manoeuvre in the meantime to support his attack as a second wave. The lead squadron deployed as if on parade and moved forward at a trot.

¹ *Szwolężerów*. These were not lancers, unlike most of the Polish cavalry.

² Hnidava is now a suburb of southern Lutsk. Boratyn is just south-east of it.



In the meantime the battery commander, who was near me, was also shown the attacking line and a column emerging from Worotniów, and told to start firing. Within a few minutes the battery had galloped to an open position and already started to fire.



A pre-war map of the area, helpfully showing Hill 236

The rest of the regiment, deployed in march order out into a line to the left and halted. I had the Technical Squadron on the right wing, the 2nd Squadron in the centre, and the HMG Squadron horsemen on the left wing, as the machine-gunners had been hurried out and had taken up positions just outside the battery, ready to commence firing as soon as the Cossacks' line came within effective range.

While this was taking place, thoughts were boiling in my head and I grew more tense, especially because I could see more and more new troops coming out of Worotniów, following the lead unit, and some of them were heading further to the right, behind Worotniów farm. I was well aware of the fact that this was going to be no easy matter and that a decisive battle was going to take place despite having so few squadrons. Unfortunately there was no time to ask the brigade commander to return my missing squadrons.

The distance between the Cossacks and our 1st Squadron decreased with lightning speed. To make matters worse we suddenly receive some shrapnel and HE from the area of Lyszcze village, which burst right in front of the line of my deployed squadrons. Unfortunately, our battery has to move away, because it was standing inside the range and could be easily seen. The battery commander told me that he was going to reposition himself by the road and did so with lightning speed. I looked over at the cavalrymen and saw that, despite the Bolshevik artillery's rather accurate fire, everyone was still in their places.

Another look in the direction of the Bolsheviks did not comfort me at all. On their left flank, the silhouettes of a few armoured cars emerged from behind their lines. However, they were far away and still had a few kilometres to go across the countryside. Our 1st Squadron was now hidden in the dust and depressions of the terrain.

The setting July sun intensified with its redness the mood of the moment. I turned towards the road and there saw our infantry marching calmly past in fours; I had not yet managed to inform them of the imminent danger. I was nonetheless surprised that, despite the fact that our artillery was shooting and that



Bolshevik shells were bursting relatively close to the road, they did not send any units towards the threatened direction.

In that position, with squadrons standing under artillery fire (admittedly, by luck, with no losses so far) and realising that the 1st Squadron would be repelled, I decided to withdraw the entire line behind Hill 236 to hide them from artillery observation. That was no more than 200 paces back. The machine-gunners remained in their current positions, which would enable them to commence flanking fire on the charging Cossacks once the 1st Squadron had withdrawn.

I made my final decision, to use my main force for a charge once I could see my own squadron retreating and with the machine guns firing on the Cossacks. The attacking enemy's line would be disordered due to the long distance and the pursuit, especially with the surprise fire of the machine guns from the flank.

The squadrons left for behind the hill at the gallop. I admit that I had one unpleasant moment. As I turned my horse to follow them, I lost sight of my line. And then it occurred to me what would happen if the line didn't stop, but kept going all the way to the road and I could not turn it back in time?

But it was only a flash of concern. I immediately came back to my senses. After all, so far none of the regiment's units had failed. The squadrons were small, but made up of veterans, seasoned by fighting in the most difficult conditions.

When I found myself on the ridge of Hill 236, I saw the entire line already standing quietly. In front of the right wing of the Technical Squadron stood our mountain guns,³ about 100 paces away, ready to fire. Lieutenant Sylwek Kowalczewski was already "in office" there, rubbing his hands together, thinking how he would fire so accurately at the Cossacks and prove for the umpteenth time that, although he was not an artilleryman, he knew how to shell them.

The funniest was the unit from the Machine gun Squadron formed up in line, as each of the riders also had control of a pack or spare horses. Only barely "cavalry", they were needed to extend the line and charge with us when there were not enough line squadrons.

Meanwhile, the wild shouts of the charging troops had started to reach us. I felt sorry for poor Juliusz,⁴ who had been sent off with the squadron as to an execution. Then the first outlines of riders appeared on the ridge. At first I thought they were Cossacks.

Now a unique moment in the war took place, when in front of a line of three deployed squadrons I gave the command aloud: "Sabres in hand! Charge at the gallop!"

I must admit that I commanded in such a grave voice that I myself got the shivers. I didn't hear the fire of our machine guns; reportedly they gave a short burst and then jammed.

We moved off, putting our spurs into the horses' flanks.

Then I saw the 1st Squadron turn around just behind us and join in. I thought, what a great unit! It is an exceptional feat in war to rally from such a retreat, with the Cossacks almost on their backs, and go so smoothly into a mounted charge without delay.

After a few seconds the lines collided. Ours was ordered, dense and compact. Theirs were on better horses, but had been moving some distance. The Cossacks were clearly surprised. Our line appeared before them as if from out of the ground. No wonder a retreat began. The roles had been reversed.

During the charge I saw several horsemen in front of me and did them no great harm. The first one I caught up with, I cut him with what I thought was a terrible blow, but the Bolshevik only flinched; I passed him and I realised that I had only a piece of my sabre left in my hand, the rest of it had broken off. He was taken care of by my orderly, a peasant farmer and altogether a tough man. Then I chased a group of three horsemen, the last of whom was shooting at me repeatedly with his *Nagant*. I fired my pistol, but also without success.

³ A lot of horse artillery used mountain guns, as they were lighter.

⁴ I assume this is Lieutenant Dudzinski.



Finally I passed some isolated cottages and came across the cavalymen of the 4th Squadron. It turned out that the brigade commander, seeing the regiment readying to charge, directed the 4th Squadron (which he had in reserve near the village of Krupa) into the flank of the charging Cossacks.

Dusk had now fallen and the squadrons began to regather. While Lieutenant Mastalerz was shouting, "2nd Squadron, regroup!", on the northern bank of the stream a Cossack squadron was also regrouping. Finally the squadrons were gathered on the road near Kol. Worotniów⁵ and the reports from the battle followed. The squadrons had reached the marshy meadows south of the Klęczany to Worotniów line, but unfortunately, they could not reach Worotniów. They had watched as a Bolshevik battery harnessed up and galloped away towards the north-east.

The prisoners were gathered, but there were not many as the fading light made it difficult to search the area. About a dozen horses and prisoners were taken. Small patrols remained on the battlefield to find our wounded and killed.

Own losses amounted to: 4 cavalymen killed, 6 wounded (including one officer), 3 horses killed and 10 wounded.

There were left 63 Cossack corpses, chopped up terribly. One could see from them that our men had done their work diligently.

Unfortunately, there was no time for even the slightest rest. The column was pulled out and we had to march to Piane.

This charge made a very positive impression on the regiment. After all, it was evident that we had fought against at least a fourfold advantage. The prisoners testified that the 35th Cossack Brigade took part in the charge.

We were lucky that while in the initial positions there was no question of surprise, the regiment's charge across the ridge of Hill 236 caught the Cossacks utterly unawares, and was crowned with complete success. It must be impartially admitted that the victory was the work of all the commanders and privates – who knew how to bring out their courage, energy and zeal at the decisive moment.

The description by the author, an old experienced soldier, is so eloquent that there is no particular need to supplement it with a synthesis. Nevertheless, I would like to provide the reader with a few pieces of information that illuminate the episode described and raise the significance of the battle in question.

It must be realised that the battle took place at a time when the initiative and success of Budienny's Horse Army were at its peak.

In war it is the case that psychological factors must be taken into account. Well, in this case, which in comparison some others did not yield extraordinary spoils or triumphs, it is necessary to assess the courage and difficulty of the decision of the regimental commander.

The charge was directed against a victorious, battle-hardened and more numerous opponent. Therefore it required completely different combat values than those which would be needed if, for example, it was facing fleeing and tired infantry, who had dropped their weapons!

The description is tactically extremely valuable. The reader sees a fragment of a cavalry battle based on a concept; commanded and conducted in such a way that events result from an accurate assessment of the situation and are not – as is often the case – the work of chance.

The commander judges, thinks and orders! He looks for opportunities and uses them. Being weaker and acting in spite of many unknowns, he first ties down the enemy by sending one squadron against him. At the same time a battery and machine guns take up their firing positions.

⁵ Now cleared for the airport. It was about halfway on the road from Klęczany to Ostrożec.



The commander foresaw that the action of the 1st Squadron could only act as reconnaissance, that it would have to give way under the pressure. Using this awareness he retired his main forces a bit, covering himself with firepower and drew the Cossacks into a trap. The charge of the main force set off with total surprise and this undoubtedly was a prime reason for its success.

Then it turns out that the brigade commander was also not acting passively. At the crucial moment he directed the 4th Squadron from another section of the battlefield to support the regiment fighting. This is a good example of co-operation and comradeship in battle.

Finally, my review would not be complete if I did not mention that the episode is about an exceptionally brave unit, which the 1st Light Horse Regiment had shown to be in the previous campaign. It is clear that the regimental commander could act boldly because he knew the men would do their duty! A good plan is possible with the full understanding of commanders and of subordinates. In the decisive moment none of them are missing, as even the 1st Squadron turned back immediately to join the victorious charge.

Editor

